

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems by Joseph Freeman, Louise Bogan, Frank
Ernest Hill, Martha Ostenso, and others — — —

Prose Articles on Emily Dickinson — — — — —

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Vita Nuova

I

DO not omit the pleasure of a cheek
Touched tenderly or kissed; seek what you've sought
Eagerly always; love is good to seek;
But do not omit to know the glory of thought.
For look: I ask you, not to think of me,
Of mankind, or of fate, or death, or birth;
Think only of yourself, but thoroughly,
And you will know the secrets of the earth.
For, as your face came out of older faces,
So, the most casual word that you may say
Echoes the history of forgotten races,
The intricate customs of a vanished day;
The passions of a hundred ancient herds
Beat loudly in the mind that reads these words.

—*Joseph Freeman.*

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Earth and Air

I

EARTH is the tower of granite, the floor of loam,
The grass that seeds, the sheep that fatten for men,
The shapes that are beaten in fire or built in wall,
The plow preparing the soil to be born again,
The crystal well, the gold of the honey comb,
And hands that pattern with wool or hide or clay;
Earth is the wain, the sickle, the sledge, the stall—
Earth is our yesterday.

II

Air is the thrust of steam and of burning gas,
The spark men take from the foam of a falling stream,
The word of the first sea caught on the last of the seven,
Ships with the speed of a dream made more than dream;
The throb of steel in a cage of steel and glass,
Iron fingers at smooth and gleaming play,
Air is the wings of men on the sea of heaven—
Air is to-day.

III

Earth is the suck of men, their loaf and their healing;
With earth they are poor but sapful, driven but strong;
Air is a high, thin world where their eyes grow weaker,
Their round breasts flatten, their cheeks fall white and long.
Air is a shifting floor and a viewless ceiling,
Genii building and wrecking and building again,
It is half-heard magic speech from a hidden speaker
Sounding through light and rain.

IV

Men with the vision of air went planning and building;
They dreamed of slaves of iron and wrought their slaves;
They envied the wind and the eagle and spread their wings
Above the shadow of sinking woods and waves.
Men made little suns for the midnight's gilding,
Bridged with their wires the bridgeless gap of seas;
They dulled the teeth of winter, they turned the stings
And withering of disease.

V

Men with the dream of air have climbed to their vision,
But now they are faint for the meat of a day gone by;
The steeds of the sun race on in a golden madness,
The hurtling drivers are pale in the height of the sky.
Some say: "Hard Fate in a wrath and a great derision
Has laid the tools of gods in the hands of men;
Can dust breed stars? Can tears be distilled to gladness!
Let us go to earth again!"

VI

But the many hear not, the millions follow their dreaming,
Driving their iron cattle on stone or steel,
Flying their iron hawks on an airy ocean,
Bearing children that play with the spark and the wheel.
They will never turn from swiftness and silver gleaming,
Or the sense that he who has taken in wheel or rod
The staff of gods and the magic of god-like motion
Himself shall become a god.

VII

Perhaps they will come again to the sun and the bough,
The wind and the clod that once were their strife and their fare;
They will take not of olden beauty or olden toil;
They will only come back to earth when earth is air—
When they girdle the peaks with pavement and send their plow
Like a whirl of wind, and store their snow and their sun,
And sow where the strength they have sifted into the soil
Yields five instead of one.

VIII

Look back, then, you who had love for earth, and regret her
And mourn a change that harries your hill and sky;
For men are turned from the peace of the scythe and candle;
Their eyes are fierce for the bright and the swift and the high.
They have wrecked a world for the leaping dream of a better,
And gone from peace toward a peace beyond a war,
They have mouted untrodden stairs to a key and a handle
That open a door.

—*Frank Ernest Hill*

Woman Death

WASH over her, wet light
Of this dissolving room.
Dusk smelling of night,
Lay on her placid gloom.
Wash over her; as waves push back the sands
Fold down her hands.

Many another rain
Of dusk has filled such walls;
Many a woman has lain
Submerged where the damp light falls,
Wanting her hands held down,
Finding it strange that they
Alone refuse to drown.

The mind after its day
Fills like an iron cup
With waters of the night.
The eyes wisely give up
The little they held of light.
Move over her, subdue her, Dark, until
Her hands are still.

Out of the east comes night;
From west, from north, from south,
Gathers the blackened light
To move against her mouth.
Many another has known
These four pressures of space,
Feeling her lips grow stone
And hollows curving her face,
And cared so little to feel.
Her light had never given
More than her dark might steal;
Then for this she had striven:
To feel the quiet moving on her hands
Like thin sea over sands.

Time gathers to break
In arrested thunder, gloom
Comes with thickness to make
Deep ocean of a room,
Comes to soothe and shape
The breathed-out breath.

Some who die escape
The rhythm of their death,
Some may die and know
Death as a broken song,
But a woman dies not so, not so;
A woman's death is long.

—*Hazel Hall*

Be at Peace

CLOSE your eyes that have seen too much,
Close them at my fingers' touch.
Close your eyes, love, and rest your head.
Forget every word ever said.

Let there be no bitterness now,
Only the lifting of a bough,
Only a wind, lonely, alone,
Wandering the way from stone to stone.

Wandering the worn and weary way,
Wandering slow with nothing to say,
Into a space beyond the moon,
To die there soon, so very soon.

So close your eyes from seeing all.
My love shall tell you of the fall
Of a light leaf. There is no thing
More beautiful your eyes can sing.

—*Judith Tractman*

Fantasy of the Weak

THE strident emptiness of days
Will tunefully resound.
The laggards' feet will come to ways,
Where no one, yet, has frowned.

Ruin soothes the battered heads.
That hour will flaunt its charms
When trembling hands will pluck to shreds
The work of mighty arms.

—*Sidney W. Wallach.*

In Praise of Restraint

I DO not like the gorgeousness of June—
Her obvious, crude, spectacular display—
The chill glow of a February noon
Implies florescence in a subtler way.

Nora B. Cunningham

A Girl to Juan

WINTER, that is a fireless room
In a locked house, was our love's home.
The days turn and you are not here,
O changing with the little year!

Now when the scent of plants half-grown
Is more the season's than their own,
And neither sun nor wind can stanch
The gold forsythia's dripping branch

Another maiden, still not I,
Looks from some hill upon some sky,
And since she loves you, and she must,
Puts her young cheek against the dust.

Louise Bogan.

To a Successful Hen

YOU cackle, cackle off the nests
And give a henny "Hip Hooray!"
To tell us on the straw there rests
A delicate brown egg today.

And, Hen, it is a miracle
To lay a crimson-crested cock
In a warm almost-lilac shell
Quiet as a rounded bit of rock.

Scuttle away on yellow legs!—
Something loves Humor, Life or you:
To lay such innocent still eggs
Full of red cockadoodledoo!

—*E. Merrill Root.*

King

RICH red rooster crowing at the sun,
Bright green grass growing at the sun,
Fat white cow lowing at the sun,
Clean spring wind blowing at the sun. . .
Who wouldn't be the sun?

In the Pool

I SAW a tiny fish like a tiny silver leaf;
I saw a great fish like a great silver leaf.
A path like a silver hair was carved by the tiny fish;
A path like a silver sword was carved by the great fish
Through the pool that was a blood opal in the sunset.
The path like a silver sword
Cut the path like a silver hair,
And a shadow covered all the pool.

Martha Ostenso

Transparency for a Spring Window

THE things that reach
To clear delight
Are white, are white—
The chill thin moon
White running stags
Blanched skies at dusk
Snow-glistening crags
And fragile bones
And frost in frets,
Pale cherry boughs
And violets.

—*Elizabeth Coatsworth.*

Prudence

A CRAZY wind came whistling
Through the chamber of his brain
And straightway he fastened its casements
For fear he should go insane.

He pulled down the shades and locked the doors
And shut out all the light,
And now he is as seeing a man
As ever lost his sight.

—*Basil Thompson*

A Retouched Portrait

(*The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson.* By Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1924.)

"The soul selects her own society
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

Unmoved, she notes the chariot's passing
At her low gate;
Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
Upon her mat.

I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention
Like stone."

"**W**HERE one can no longer love, there should one—pass by!" The philosophy which Emily Dickinson applied, in simple, wise, and practical fashion, to her life, has won for her an immortality both sad and ironic. She has become an Old Wives' legend; a Mysterious Recluse, subject of solemn gossip and celibate admiration; a New England female saint, prized possession of serious folks—and their spiritual descendants—who feel that there was in her something queer not to care for their black-mitted, small-college-town diversions. How much more queer it would be if she had! Emily Dickinson deserves a better memorial.

She certainly was no obscurantist; and her attitude of indifference towards recognition seems to me to have been thrust upon her. In her letters there are several hints of an opposite tendency, at least two direct questions as to whether she might not publish;—and the frequency with which, in her later days, she sent tokens, of one kind or another, to friends and neighbors, is suggestive and symbolical.

The *Life and Letters*, now edited by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, and published by Houghton Mifflin, reorganize rather than add to our knowledge of that brilliant spirit. The chapter on early social life in Amherst is interesting for its atmosphere, and the chapter entitled, "A Hedge Away" is delightful. Emily Dickinson's notes to children were not included in the 1894 volumes, and her relations with her young nephews and nieces were charm-

ing. For the rest, there is little in the book that cannot be found in the poems themselves, or in the previous collection of letters, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, and published in 1894. In spite of the fact that Mrs. Todd worked like a beaver to get together what she did in the 1894 volumes, on one occasion even making a trip to Colorado to try to get some Helen Hunt Jackson letters, it is no literary secret that the Dickinson heirs have not been entirely satisfied with the results. Mrs. Bianchi has omitted twenty letters from that collection: five written to a girlhood friend, (1851-1853), three to her brother, seven to another friend of her youth, one to Mr. Bowles, and four to her cousins; and has cut some of the rest. The omissions are of little significance: on the other hand, as one student writes, "'Sister Sue' assumes an importance in this book that she certainly did not formerly have in my mind. There is absolutely no mention of her in the two previous volumes, and, so far as I can recall, no reference to her in Emily Dickinson's letters." It is annoying to find, in an authoritative volume, such minor inaccuracies as Mr. Samuel Bowles' photograph printed for that of Dr. J. G. Holland. Neither does the frontispiece appeal to me—a "retouched portrait,"—of the girl whose hair was bold, like the chestnut burr; whose eyes were the color of the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves. . . . !

Again, the scrupulous restraint of this memoir will not please everybody. "Mme. Bianchi seems to me to make Emily too much resigned to her lot. The passion and rebellion are suggested, but Christ hangs on the cross too delicately. I was especially disappointed not to learn more about her love-affair. That was, evidently, the central drama of her life. Love; dutiful agony; renunciation; 'too private and dreadful to tell' . . . the rest is silence. Still, I am grateful for what we have, and we have a good deal—not through the comments on her, but through her own words, letters, adventures with her awful family, etc. You can't kill a vivid spirit like hers,—it breaks from the decorous tomb."

It has little to do with a proper review of the book but I wish time and space were available for brief praise of Emily Dickinson as literary artist. Everything that the Imagist Creed contains is embodied quietly in her work. Yet the rapturous acclaim that greeted the modern enunciation of those principles subsides into a depreciat-

ing gesture and murmured observations of "Poor technique! awkward way of expressing herself!" when these same Bostonian critics—the whole succession, from the Higginsons to the Aikens, talk of Emily Dickinson. For the life of me, I cannot understand it: apparently the profession of a creed is more important than practice of it; Swinburne and Tennyson, Lindsay and Amy Lowell the only kind of musical poets whose music is music; the drum—perhaps the trouble is really with the ears of the critics. For fear of touching on a delicate subject, there I leave it.

Rolfe Humphries

Clothes vs. Girl

THE publication of "The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson" (Houghton Mifflin) is an apt occasion to say what cannot be said too often: Emily Dickinson is one of our three or four American poets.

"Of all that is written, I love only what a person hath written with his blood. Write with blood, and thou wilt find that blood is spirit." So said Nietzsche. And the reason Emily Dickinson is a great poet is simply that she has something to say, and not a gaudy way of saying nothing. Her poetry is life—blood—spirit—in Nietzsche's sense. One meets a woman, and not a spangle of aesthetic details.

Emily Dickinson possessed, among other qualities, humor and passion. She had a fine feeling for the rich incongruities of life: she could be poetically humorous; and she could also (greatest use for a sense of humor!) stand aside and see herself objectively. Her radiant, fanciful type of humor is well shown in the following:

"Is it true, dear Sue?
Are there Two?
I shouldn't like to come
For fear of joggling Him!
If you could shut him up
In a coffee cup,
Or tie him to a pin
Till I got in,
Or make him fast
To Pussy's fist,
Hist! Whist!
I'd come!"

Her darker humor appears in this:

"Now I lay thee down to sleep,
I pray the Lord thy dust to keep,
If thou should live before thou wake,
I pray the Lord thy soul to make!"

Her passion fills all the poems, till they are like alabaster filled with flame. One feels, within all her poems, her spirit like a sky where stars and lightnings float; her spirit made of dew and dynamite. Her poems are now like fireflies winking and whirling over the August corn, now like white rain across which fall the tawny lashes of lightning, now like the grave beauty of a world covered with new-fallen snow. But always—behind and within the poems—one feels her spirit—that radiant mind and heart which we call Emily Dickinson.

We cannot say, "Who touches this book touches a man"; but we can say these rarer words, "Who touches this book touches a woman."

Compare a great poet like Emily Dickinson with a pseudo-poet like Amy Lowell. The difference is of the same tremendous and utter kind as between Joan of Arc and Marie Antoinette.

Emily Dickinson, without knowing him, was a sister of Whitman. Miss Lowell is fond of claiming Whitman as her literary grandfather. Untermeyer even suggests that Emily Dickinson was a forerunner of the imagists—which is like making Christ the forerunner of John the Baptist. Imagine it! Amy Lowell a child of Whitman! Why, she is not redly human: if you cut her, she would not bleed—she would exude spiritual ichor, like one of Milton's angels. When you compare her with Whitman, you see that if he is the great free shaggy wolf, wandering the open spaces of the world and baying cosmically at the moon, Miss Lowell is a coddled lap-dog. When you compare her with Whitman, you see that she is as like him as the wind from a society lady's fan is like a Kansas cyclone.

In the first place, Emily Dickinson gives us depths; Miss Lowell gives us surfaces. The latter certainly tosses her toys about with a bright, antic dexterity: she is a clever juggler playing with colored balls. She has undoubted ability to give us the shapes and surfaces, the colors and glitter of things. Nietzsche's words may not apply to all women, but they apply to Miss Lowell: "Surface is woman's soul, a mobile, stormy film on shallow water." Miss Lowell can

give us a gruesome tangle of aesthetic details, or the spangles and pretty tinsel of life. But when she comes to psychology, to philosophy, to lyric emotion, there is about her something false and superficial, something shrill and shrieky. If great poetry consisted in describing cuckoo clocks, weird moonlight, and dead men's bones, Miss Lowell would be a great poet. But poetry is something other than a crisp, frosty spatter of words. The only human soul she can give us is that of an artificial super-lady—as in "Patterns." She can give us this because she has only to give us herself. Behind all her verse we see the woman—

"Just a plate of current fashion,
Tripping by in high-heeled, ribboned shoes,
Not a softness anywhere about me,
Only whale-bone and brocade."

The abysses of life, the rich humor of life, the human loves and hates—you might as well expect them in Miss Lowell's verse as to expect to take fire from the photograph of a second-rate glow-worm.

Emily Dickinson had a sense of humor; Miss Lowell has none. If she had, she would not have written that crimson atrocity about red slippers; she would not have told us about taking her morning bath in the shiny water; she would not have publicly longed to be a carpenter driving shiny nails into a roof. Nor would she have read a wild newspaper rumor about poison candy dropped over French villages by German aeroplanes, and then hurried home to write a long solemn poem on the theme, ending the humorless enormity by suggesting that the cooks in Germany will all wear iron crosses, and the scullery maids will "trip to church in new ribbons sent from Potsdam." The poem not only displays cheap mob thinking, but also quite clearly proves that, so far as a sense of humor goes, Miss Lowell is a spiritual also-ran. Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, had the fine and subtle wisdom of spiritual insight, tempered always by humor like sunlight.

Then too there is a difference in emphasis on form. Emily Dickinson had something to say, and so her forms came out of her emotion, not out of her conscious reason. Her images were never ends in themselves, but symbols of passion. A tiger does not say, "Go to! I think I shall strive to express myself today in a coat of tawny flame and purple pansy stripes!" He simply expresses the

wild impulse of life that is in him—and finds himself “Tiger, tiger, burning bright.”

But to Miss Lowell form is a constant intellectual consideration: she thinks so much about polyphonic zig-zags that she forgets the tiger. Emily Dickinson’s poetry is like a girl vivid with natural, free, inevitable beauty; Miss Lowell’s is like a sophisticated society girl who depends upon her fashionable dress and her pearls to make us overlook her lack of intelligence and spirit. Form is either the inevitable expression of the inner energy, or it is clever intellectual antics—the rouge and costuming and hair-dressing of verse. Fashionable society women are very punctilious about dress; Eve, “deep in the bells and grass,” may not have any dress more fashionable than a fig leaf—but she is a lovely woman, not “Just a plate of current fashion.”

Miss Lowell, like a girl frantic to fascinate a difficult lover, turns from the gown of regular meters to the dress of free verse, and then to the dress of polyphonic prose, and then to a Japanese kimona, and then back to a new dress of regular meter. If she could only change the girl with the dress! Emily Dickinson’s form had no freak changes, but simply grew and deepened like one’s skin or one’s soul. She was too true a rose to try to produce roses, laurel, chrysanthemums, firecrackers, Chinese dragons, gargoyles, and cider apples, all on one bush. Miss Lowell is interesting as a sort of literary sword-swallower, a literary double-headed calf in a side-show. Emily Dickinson is interesting in the same noble and human way as Christ or Joan of Arc or Nietzsche.

And finally, comparing Emily Dickinson and Miss Lowell, the former is a star, whereas the latter is a Fourth of July rocket, which goes up with a hiss-boom, and at which many little boys and girls stare with a holy, ridiculous rapture. After Miss Lowell’s colored noise and tinsel and mock heroics, you come to Emily Dickinson with the relief of one who leaves a Mardi Gras carnival, and sits down on grey, lonely rocks by the sea-shore, and listens to the strong music of the breakers.

—*E. Merrill Root*

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Our readers will recognize the names of JOSEPH FREEMAN, FRANK ERNEST HILL, HAZEL HALL, and LOUISE BOGAN.

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ELIZABETH COATSWORTH writes us that she is eagerly awaiting the appearance of her volume, *Atlas and Beyond*, which is being brought out by Harpers.

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